

**During the first of two deployments** supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom, Senior Airman Brian Kolfage (second from top) poses with (from left to right) reporter Tara Copp, Tech. Sgt. Chad Wurm, Senior Airman Valentin Cortez and Staff Sgt. Daniel Holmes on top of a Humvee. Airman Cortez, a close friend, was one of the first people to help Airman Kolfage after he was struck by shrapnel from a mortar that exploded only a few feet away.

# Surviving AND Thriving

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi



**With a little encouragement from physical therapist Bo Bergeron** (left), Senior Airman Brian Kolfage puts his prosthetic legs to work during a physical therapy session at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Strength and balance training are an important part of his rehabilitation.



**Airmen  
returned  
to duty**

As of May 25, 196 Airmen have been listed as wounded in action since Sept. 11, 2001. 187 Airmen have returned to duty.

— Air Force  
Personnel  
Center  
Public Affairs

**Brig. Gen. David Gray, 89th Air Wing commander,** Andrews Air Force Base, Md., pins on the Air Force Commendation, Global War on Terrorism Service and Expeditionary medals during Senior Airman Kolfage's retirement ceremony in April. Airman Kolfage is also a Purple Heart recipient for the wounds he received in Iraq in September 2004.

“What doesn’t kill me only makes me that much stronger.” Based on this personal philosophy tragically acquired in Iraq, Brian Kolfage Jr., could be considered a pillar of strength.

A mortar attack left the senior airman without legs and a right arm. Doctors told him he “wasn’t supposed to live — but I did,” said Airman Kolfage, who has been surviving and thriving the past several months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

During that time, he’s gotten married, learned to walk and is leaning toward a future that includes a business degree and a government job somewhere out West. Those who know the outgoing 23-year-old, say nothing can stand in his way.

Laura Friedman, his physical therapist, first met Airman Kolfage in the intensive care unit at Walter

Reed soon after his three-day medevac journey from Balad Air Base in northern Iraq last September. Even though he was so disabled that the former security policeman couldn’t sit up on his own, he struck up a conversation about college and other future plans.

“He’s a forward thinker,” Ms. Friedman said. “He doesn’t dwell on what he doesn’t have, but instead focuses on what he does have, and he works with that. He’s going to do well for himself no matter what he does. If he can get through this, he can get through anything.”

There was nothing out of the ordinary about his life to prepare him for what lay ahead. His formative years were spent as a “beach rat” surfing and hanging out in Honolulu, where he met Nikki Grounds, who became his girlfriend, and later his wife.

Her father was reassigned to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and Airman Kolfage soon followed. He

had tried college for a semester with an interest in marine biology, but said he lacked focus and joined the Air Force with the intent of finishing his degree while in the military.

After technical school, he was assigned to Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, where his first day on the job as a gate guard was Sept. 11, 2001. It was exactly three years later when he exited his tent quarters at Balad. It was early afternoon, and he had just awakened after working the night shift as an inspector for the Department of Agriculture checking luggage and packages leaving the base.

He had deployed to Kuwait a few weeks prior, but volunteered for the job in Iraq because he was “pretty

excited to be part of something firsthand. I like to be where the action is,” said Airman Kolfage, who was on his second Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment.

Balad had come under mortar attack almost daily during the short time he’d been there. He was walking through tent city to the morale tent for some water when a 107 mm mortar shell landed about five feet away, knocking him nearly six feet through the air. He landed face-first onto a wall of sandbags, but remained conscious.

### No thoughts of death

“You won’t think about death. I didn’t. I just wanted to go home and be with Nikki. I wasn’t scared. I was angry that it was me and not knowing what was going to happen to me. I was lying on rocks. I took a look around and saw bloody body parts everywhere — muscle and skin. It made me more furious.”

His good friend and tent mate, Senior Airman Valentin Cortez, was thrown from his bed and could hear debris raining down from the mortar blast that shredded tents in the immediate area of its impact. Airman Cortez called out to his friend, but heard only yelling and screaming from outside.

With mortar shells still falling close by, Airman Cortez rushed outside and saw, through a cloud of dust in the air, a body lying on the ground. When he realized who it was, he knelt down beside his friend and feared he was dead until he suddenly gasped for air. As Airman Cortez and others treated his injuries, which included a collapsed lung, Airman Cortez said he tried to divert his friend’s attention from seeing the extent of his wounds.

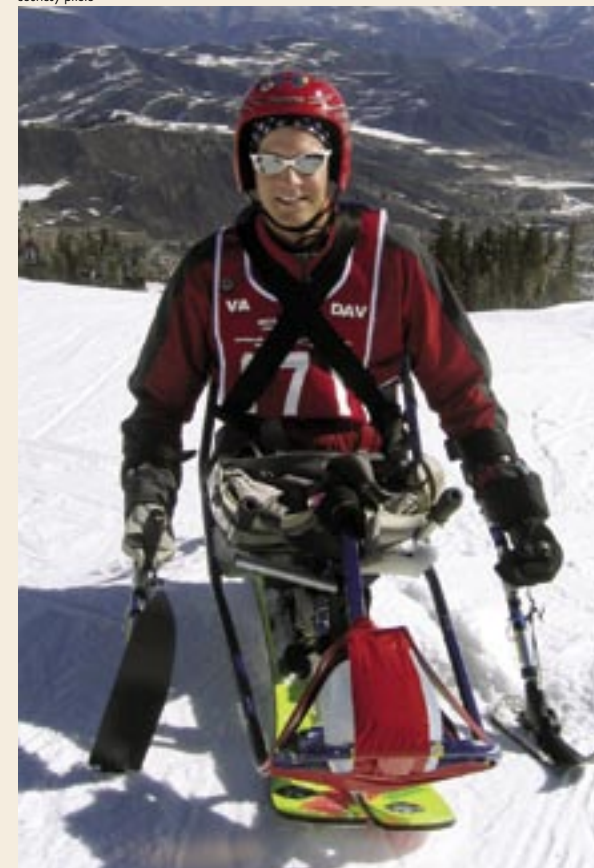
“However, he looked at me, and in a calm and collected voice, he said, ‘Man I already know. Just get me home to Nikki,’” Airman Cortez said in a written statement about the incident.

### Rushed to hospital

Airman Kolfage was rushed to the base hospital where his three limbs were amputated. During surgery, a call went out for blood and within minutes, dozens of people rushed to the hospital. It was to be the first of 16 painful surgeries, most of them to remove shrapnel and debris. Even today, shrapnel and debris still emerge as small, sand-sized particles that can be squeezed from his body like a blister.

About three days later, he arrived at Walter Reed. Nikki arrived soon after and has remained at his bedside since. It was in his hospital room where they

courtesy photo



**Perhaps taking physical therapy to the limits,** Airman Kolfage used his Bi-Ski to top speeds of more than 40 mph on his first run ever during an April ski trip to Aspen, Colo.

were married in a private ceremony.

“It’s tough by yourself,” Airman Kolfage said. “I couldn’t have done it without her.”

It’s been tough enough even with her. It took three weeks before he could sit up on his own. However, becoming adept with his prosthetic right hand came quickly, because his left hand was in a cast, and he was forced to use his prosthetic arm exclusively. To condition his body for what was ahead, such as prosthetic legs, required up to six hours of physical therapy five days a week, much of it devoted to strength and balance.

He makes a physical therapist’s job an easy one, said Ms. Friedman, describing Airman Kolfage as an independently minded hard worker who excels at adapting and problem solving. She said his sense of humor and positive attitude are equally important. Some of her patients are angry at their situations; others set limits within their minds.

“I knew it would be harder if I fought it,” Airman Kolfage said during a telephone interview while accompanying Nikki at a nail salon across the street from Walter Reed. “It’s not really that bad. You just have to learn to do everything all over again.” ♡